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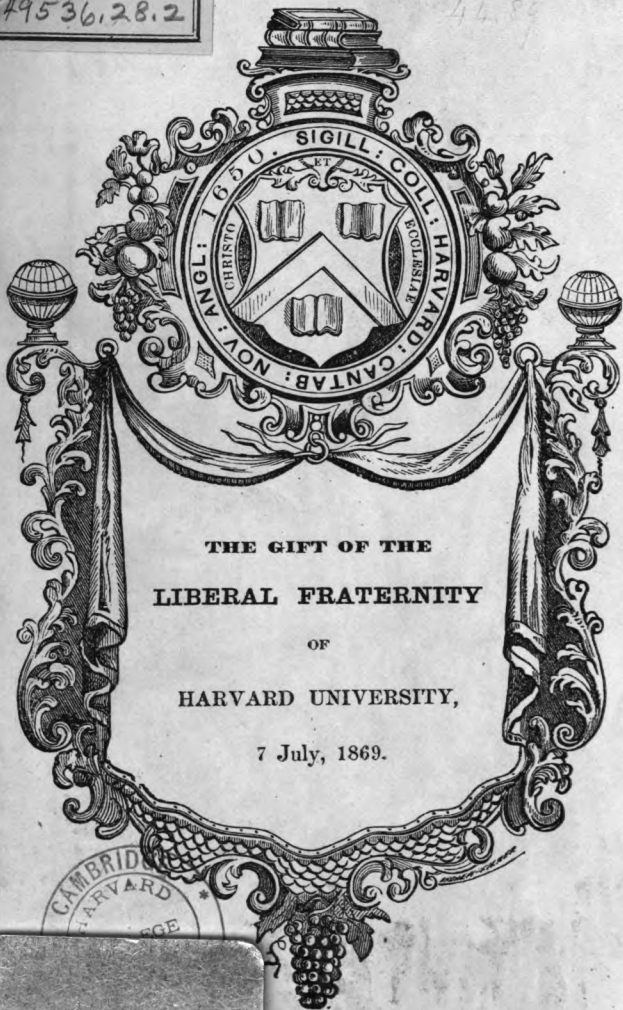


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BEST HOURS.

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THE GIFT OF THE
LIBERAL FRATERNITY
OF
HARVARD UNIVERSITY,

7 July, 1869.

Mr. Chapman

REMINISCENCES
OF THE
BEST HOURS OF LIFE
FOR THE
HOUR OF DEATH.

From the German of Jean Paul ^(Friedrich) Richter.

—♦—

BOSTON:
JOSEPH DOWE, 22 COURT STREET.
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BEST HOURS.

JEREMY TAYLOR says, “ Bear in thy sickness all along the same thoughts, propositions, and discourses concerning thy person, thy life and death, thy soul and religion, which thou hadst in the best days of thy health, and when thou didst discourse wisely concerning things spiritual. For it is to be supposed that thou hast cast about in thy health, and considered thy change, and the evil day, that thou must be sick and die, that

thou must need a comforter, and that it was certain that thou wouldst fall into a state in which all the cords of the anchor would be stretched, and the very rock and foundation of faith should be attempted ; and whatsoever fancies may disturb you, or whatsoever weakness may invade you, yet consider, when you were better able to judge and govern the accidents of your life, you concluded it necessary to trust in God, and possess your souls with patience. Think of things as they think that stand by you, and as you did when you stood by others ;—that it is a blessed thing to be patient ; that a quietness of spirit hath a cer-

tain reward ; that still there is infinite truth and reality in the promises of the Gospel ; that still thou art in the care of God, in the condition of a son, and working out thy salvation with labor and pain, with fear and trembling ; that now the sun is under a cloud, but it still sends forth the same influence. And be sure to make no new principles upon the stock of a quick and an impatient sense, or too busy an apprehension. Keep your old principles and upon their stock discourse and practice on toward your conclusion.”

“ When a good man dies, one that hath

lived innocently, or made joy in heaven at his timely and effective repentance, and in whose behalf the holy Jesus hath interceded prosperously,—then the joys break forth through the clouds of sickness, and the conscience stands upright, and confesses the glories of God, and owns so much integrity that it can hope for pardon, and obtain it too. Then the sorrows of the sickness do but untie the soul from its chain, and let it go forth, first into liberty and then into glory ; for it is but a little while that the face of the sky was black, like the preparations of night, but quickly the cloud was torn and rent, the violence

of the thunder parted it into little portions, that the sun might look forth with a watery eye, and then shine without a tear."

“ GIVE me,” said Herder, to his son, as he lay in the parched weariness of his last illness, “ give me a great thought, that I may quicken myself with it.”

It marks a strange perversity in human nature, that we are wont to offer nothing but images of terror, no stars of cheering light, to those who lie imprisoned in the darkness of a sick bed, when the glitter of the dew of life is waxing grey and dim before them. It is indeed hard that lamentations and emotions are frequently vented upon the dying, which would be withheld from the living in all their vigor ; as if the sick patient was to console those in health.

There stands no spirit in the closeness of a sick chamber to awaken a cheering smile on the nerveless, colorless countenance; but only confessors, lawyers, and doctors, who order every thing, and relatives who lament at every thing. There stands no lofty spirit elevated above the circumstance of sorrow, to conduct the prostrate soul of the sufferer, thirsty for the refreshment of joy, back to the old spring-tide waters of pious recollection, and so to mingle these with the last ecstasies of life, as to give the dying man a forboding of his transition to another state. On the contrary, the death-bed is narrowed into a coffin without a lid. The value of life is enhanced to the departing one, by lies which promise cure, or words which proffer consolation; the

bier is represented as a scaffold, the harsh discord of life is trumpeted into the ears, which survive long after the eyes are dead, instead of letting life ebb away like an echo, in sounds ever deeper though fainter. Nevertheless man has this of good in him, that he recalls the slightest joy which he has shared with a dying person, far rather than a thousand greater pleasures given to one in health; perhaps because in the latter case we hoped to repeat and redouble our attentions; so little do mortals reflect that every pleasure they give or receive may be the last.

Our exit from life would therefore be greatly more painful than our entrance into it, were it not that our good mother Nature had previously mitigated its suffer-

ings, by gently bearing her children from one world to another, when they are already heavy with sleep. For in the hour before the last, she allows a breastplate of indifference toward the survivors, to freeze about the heart of the lamented one; and in the hour immediately preceding dissolution, (as we learn from those who have recovered from apparent death, and from the demeanor of many dying persons,) the brain is, as it were, inundated and watered by faint eddies of bliss, comparable to nothing upon earth better than the ineffable sensations felt by a patient under magnetic treatment.

We can by no means know how high these sensations of dying may reach, as we have accounts of them from none but those

in whom the process has been interrupted ; nor can we ascertain whether it is not these ecstasical transports which exhaust life more than the convulsions of pain, and which loosen the tie of this terrestrial state in some unknown heaven.

The history of the dying is a serious and prodigious history, but on earth its leaves will never be unrolled.

IN the little village of Heim, Gottreich Hartmann resided, with his old father who was a curate ; and although the old man had well nigh outlived all those whom he had loved, he was made happy by his son.

Gottreich discharged his duties for him in the parish, not so much in aid of his parent's unflinching vigor, as to satisfy his own energy, and to give his father the exquisite gratification of being edified by his child and companion.

In Gottreich there thrilled a spirit of true poetry; he was not, like the greater number of poetical young men, a bulbous plant, which, when it has sent forth its one flower, fattens its unseemly fruit underground; but he was a tree, which crowned its variegated blossoms with sweet and beautiful fruits; and these buds were as yet coiled up from the warmth of the earliest springtide of a poet's life.

His father had had in his youth a poet's ardor of like intensity, but it was not fa-

vored by the times ; for in the last century, many a spirit which might have soared high, was encaged in the pulpit or the law court, because the old fashioned middle classes were convinced that their offspring would find richer pasture on the meadow and in the valley, than on the peaks of the mountain of the muses.

Nevertheless, the repressed spirit of a poet, when it cannot exhale itself in creation, recoils but the more closely and fantastically into the depths of his heart. His unuttered feelings speak, in his motions, as with a voice, and his actions express his imagery ; and in this manner the poet may live as long as the man ; just as the short lived butterfly may last out the long hard winter in its chrysalis state, if it has not burst its prison in the preceding summer.

Such had been the life of the elder Hartmann, and yet more beautiful was it, because the virginal soul of the poet lives in the offices of religion, as in a nun's cell; and the twin sisters, Piety and Poetry, are wont to dwell together and stand by one another.

How beautiful and how pure is the position of God's ministers! All that is good dwells around them; religion, poetry, and the life of a shepherd of souls; whilst other professions oft serve only to choke up this goodly neighborhood. Son and father seemed to live in one another; and on the site of filial and paternal love there arose the structure of a rare and singular friendship. Gottreich not only cheered his father by the new birth of his lost poet's youth, but by the still more beautiful similarity of

their faith. In the days gone by, a minister who sent his son to the public theological schools, might expect him to return the sworn antagonist of all that he had himself daily prayed to at the altar, in the discharge of his office: the son returned to his father's roof as a missionary sent to convert the heathen, or as an antichrist. There have been many sorrows of a father, which, though all unspoken, were deeper than a mother's sorrows. But times are perhaps better now.

Gottreich, though he went to the high schools with his share of the uppish quibbling of early youth, returned with the faith of his ancestors and of his father: for he had studied under instructors who had taught him to cling rather to the teachings

of the old faith, than to the ingenious explanations of the commentators; and who had exposed to the light alone what is serviceable to man, as to a plant, and to its outward growth, but not the roots perniciously. Thus the father found again his old Christian heart sending forth new shoots in the bosom of his Gottreich, and moreover the best justification of the convictions of his life and of his love.

If it be pain for us to love and at the same time to contradict, to refuse with the head what the heart grants, it is all the sweeter to us to find ourselves and our faith transplanted forwards in a younger being. Life is then a beautiful night in which not one star goes down, but another rises in its place.

Gottreich possessed a paradise in which he labored as his father's gardener. He was at once the wife, the brother, the friend, the all that is to be loved by man, of his parent. Every Sunday brought him a new pleasure, that of preaching a sermon before his father. He displayed so much power in his pulpit eloquence, that he seemed to labor more for the elevation and edification of his father, than for the enlightenment of the common people ; though he held a maxim which I take to be far from erroneous, that the highest subjects of spiritual thought are good for the people as for children, and *that man can only learn to rise, from the consideration of that which he cannot surmount.* If the eye of the old man was moistened, or if his hands were suddenly

folded in an attitude of prayer, the Sunday became the holiest of festivals; and many a festival has there been in that quiet little parsonage, whose festivity no one understood and no one perceived. He who looks upon sermon preaching and sermon hearing as a dull pleasure, will but little understand the zest with which the two friends conversed on discourses delivered, and on those yet to come; as if pulpit criticism was as engrossing as the criticism of the stage. The approbation and the love of an energetic old man like Hartmann, whose spiritual limbs had by no means stiffened on the chilly ridge of years, could not but exercise a powerful influence on a young man like Gottreich, who more tenderly and delicately formed both in body

and mind, was wont to shoot forth in loftier and more rapid flame.

To these two happy men was added a happy woman also. Justa, an orphan, sole mistress of her property, had entirely left and sold the trading house which had been her father's in the town, and had removed into the upper part of a good peasant's cottage, to live entirely in the country. Justa did nothing in the world by halves, but she often did things more than most would deem completely, at least in all that touched her generosity. She had not long resided in the village of Heim, and seen the meek Gottreich, and listened to some of his spring-tide sermons, ere she discovered that he had won her heart, filled as it was with the love of virtue; she

nevertheless refused to give him her hand until the conclusion of the great peace, after which they were to be married. She was ever fonder of doing what is difficult than what is easy. I wish that it were here the place to tell of the May-time life they led, which seemed to blossom in the low parsonage-house, hard by the church door, under Justa's hand; how she came in the morning from her own cottage to order matters in the little dwelling for the day; how the evenings were passed in the garden, ornamented with few, but pretty flower beds, and commanding a view of many a well watered meadow and distant hill, and stars without number; how these three hearts played into one another, no one of which in this most pure and intimate

intercourse knew or felt any thing which was not of the fairest ; and how good and gay intention marked the passage of their lives. Every bench was a church chair, all was peaceful and holy, and the firmament above an infinite church dome.

In many a village and in many a house a true Eden may be hid, which has neither been named nor marked down ; for joy is fond of covering over and concealing her tenderest flowers. Gottreich reposed in such tenderness of bliss and love, of poetry and religion, of spring-time, of the past and of the future, that he feared, in the bottom of his heart, to speak his happiness out save in prayer. In prayer, thought he, man may say all, his happiness and his

misery. His father was very happy also ; there came over him a warm old age, no winter night, but a summer evening without frost or darkness ; albeit the sun of his life was sunk pretty deep below the mound of earth under which his wife was lain down to sleep.

Nothing recalls the close of life to a noble hearted young man so much as precisely the fairest and happiest hours which he passes. Gottreich, in the midst of the united fragrance and beauty of the flowers of joy, even with the morning star of life above him, could not but think on the time when the same should appear to him as evening star, warning him of sleep. Then said he to himself, " All is now so certain and so clear before me, the beauty and the

holiness of life, the splendor of the universe, the Creator, the dignity and greatness of man's heart, the bright images of eternal truth, the whole starry firmament of ideas, which enlightens, instructs, and upholds man ! But when I am grown old, and in the obstruction of death, will not all that now nestles so bloomingly and livingly about me, appear grey and dull ? Just when man is approaching that heaven which he has so long contemplated, Death holds the telescope inverted before his dim eye, and lets him see only what is empty, distant, and shadowy. But is this indeed true ? Shall I be more likely to be right, when I only feel, and think, and hope, with half a life, incapable of a keen glance, or an intense sensation ; or am I right now

that my whole heart is warm, that my whole head is clear, and my strength is fresh? I acknowledge that the present is the fittest season, and that precisely because I *do* acknowledge it to be the fittest, I will then live through this day-time of truth attentively, and bear it away with me to the evening dusk, that it may lighten my end."

In these sweetest May-hours of youth, when heaven and earth and his own heart were beating together in triune harmony, he gave ardent words to his ardent thoughts, and kept them written down under the title of "*Reminiscences of the best hours of life for the hour of death.*" He meant to cheer himself at his last hour with these views of his happy life, and to

look back from the glow of the evening to the brightness of the morning of his youth.

Thus lived these three beings, ever rejoicing more deeply in one another and in their genial happiness, when at last the chariots of the struggle and the victories of the Holy War* began to roll over the land.

Now Gottreich became another man; like a young bird of passage, which though it know nothing of summer climates, frets in its warm cage that it cannot fly away with the older birds of its kind. The active powers of his nature, which had heretofore been the quiet audience of his poetical and

* The campaign of 1813—14.

oratorical powers, arose ; and it seemed to him as if the spirit of energy, which hitherto had wasted itself like the flames of a bituminous soil on the empty air, were now seeking an object to lay hold of. He dared not however risk to propose a separation to his father, but he by turns tormented and refreshed himself inwardly with the idea of laboring and combatting with the rest. To Justa alone he confided his wishes, but she did not give them encouragement, because she thought the old man's solitude would be too great for him to bear. At last the old man himself, inspirited for war by Gottreich and his betrothed one, said that his son had better go ; that he had long desired it, and had only been silent through love for him. He

hoped, with God's aid, to be able to discharge his pastoral duties for a twelve-month, so that he too should be doing something for his country.

Gottreich departed, trusting to the autumnal strength of his father's life. He enlisted as a common soldier, and preached also wherever he was able. The entrance on a new career awakens new energies and powers, which rapidly unfold into life and vigor. Although fortune spared him the wounds which he would so willingly have brought back with him into the peaceful future of his life, in memory, as it were, of the focus of his youth, yet it was happiness enough to take part in the battles, and, like an old republican, to fight,

together with a whole nation, for the common cause.

When at length in the most beautiful month of May, which ever Germany has won by conquest, the festivals of victory and peace began in more than one nation, Gottreich was unwilling to pass those days of rejoicing so far from those who were dearest to him; he longed for their company, that his joy might be doubled; so he took the road to Heim. Thousands, before and after him, journeyed at that time over the liberated land, from a happy past to a happy future; but few there were who saw, like Gottreich, so pure a firmament over the mountains of his native valleys, in which not a star was missing, but every one of them was twinkling and

bright. Justa had already sent him the little annals of the parsonage; had told him how she longed for his return, and how his father rejoiced; how well the old man stood the labors of his office, and how she had still better secrets of joy in store for him. To these latter belonged, perhaps, one which he had not forgotten, namely, her promise to give him her hand after the great peace.

With such prospects he enjoyed in thought, ever from Whitsuntide forward, that holy evening when he should see the sun go down at Heim, when he should unexpectedly relieve the old man from all his business, and begin to prepare the tranquil festivities of the village.

As he was thinking upon that day's meeting, and as the mountains above his father's village, in which he was so soon to clasp those fond hearts to his own, were seen more and more clearly in relief against the blue sky, his "Reminiscences of the best hours of life for the hour of death," re-echoed in his soul, and he could not refrain from noting amongst them, as he went along, the joy of meeting again here below.

Behind him there was coming up a storm from the east, in the direction of his home, before which he seemed to come a happy messenger; for the storms of war, which he had seen upon the earth, had reconciled to him and made him love those of heaven; and the parched ground, the

drooping flowers, and the ears of corn had long been thirsting for the waters of the warm clouds. A parishioner of Heim, who was laboring in the fields, saluted him as he passed, and expressed his joy that the rain and Gottreich had both come at last together.

And now he caught sight of the low church steeple peeping from the clustered trees, and he entered upon that tract of the valley where the parsonage lay, all reddened by the evening sun. At every window he hoped to see his betrothed one, if perchance she might be looking out on the sunset before the storm came on ; and as he came nearer he hoped to see the lattice open, and Whitsuntide brooms in the

chief apartment, but he found nothing of all this.

At last he entered quietly the parsonage house, and slowly opened the well known door. The room was empty, but he heard a noise overhead. When he opened the door of the upper chamber, which was filled with a glow from the west, Justa was kneeling before the bed of his father, who, sitting half upright, was looking with a haggard, stiff, and bony countenance, toward the setting sun before him. A clasp of her lover to her breast, and one exclamation, was all his reception. But his father stretched his withered hand slowly out and said with difficulty, "Thou art come at the right time!" without add-

ing whether he spoke of the preachings, or of their separation.

Justa hastily related how the old man had overworked himself till body and spirit had given way together; so that he no longer took a share in anything, though he longed to be with the sharers; and how he lay prostrate, with broken wings, looking upwards like a needy child. The old man was grown hard of hearing, and she could say all this in his presence.

Gottreich soon confirmed it to himself. He would fain have infused the fire of conquest, reflected in his own bosom, which, like a red evening cloud, was announcing a fair dawn to Europe, into that old and once strong heart; but he heard neither wish nor question of it. The old

man gazed steadily upon the sun, and at last it was hid by the storm. Nevertheless the war of the elements seemed to touch him but little; the glare of life broke dimly through the thickening ice of death. A dying man knows no present—nothing but the future and the past.

On a sudden the landscape grew dark; all the winds stood pent, the earth oppressed; then there came a gush of rain and a crash of thunder. The lightning streamed around the old man, and he looked up altered and astonished. "Hist," said he, "I hear the rain once more; speak quickly, children, for I shall soon depart." Both his children clung to him, but he was too weak to embrace them.

And now, as the warm, healing springs of the clouds bathed the sick earth, down from the dripping tree to the blades of grass, and as the sky glistened mildly, as with a tear of joy, and the thunder went warring away behind the distant mountains, the sick man pointed upwards and said, "Seest thou the lordliness of God? My son, strengthen now at the last my weary soul with something holy, in the spirit of love, and not of penance; for if our hearts condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God. Say something rich in love to me of God and his works."

Then the eyes of the son overflowed to think that he should read the Reminiscences which he had prepared for his own deathbed at the deathbed of his father.

When he said this to him, the old man answered, "Hasten, my son;" and with a faltering voice Gottreich began to read.

"Remember, in the darkening hour, that the glow of the universe once filled thy breast, and that thou hast acknowledged the magnitude of existence. Hast thou not looked forth into one half of infinity by night, and into the other half by day? Think away the nothingness of space and the earth which is around thee; worlds above, around and beneath, arch thee about as a centre, all impelling and impelled; splendor within splendor, magnitude within magnitude; all brightness centering in the universal sun. Carry thy thoughts forwards through eternity toward that uni-

versal sun ; thou shalt not arrive at darkness nor emptiness. What is empty dwells only between the worlds, not around the world.

“Remember, in thy dark hour, those times when thou hast prayed to God in ecstasy, and when thou hast thought on Him—the greatest thought of finite man—the Infinite One,”—

Here the old man clasped his hands and prayed low.

“Hast thou not known and felt the existence of that Being whose infinity consists not only in his strength, his wisdom, and his eternity, but also in his love and in his justice? Canst thou forget the time when the blue sky by day, and the blue

sky by night, opened on thee, as if the mildness of God was looking down on thee? Hast thou not felt the love of the Infinite, when it veiled itself in its image, in loving hearts of men; as the sun, which casts its light not on the moon alone, for our nights, but on the morning and evening star also, and on every little twinkler, even to the farthest from the earth?

“Remember, in the dark hour, how in the spring of thy life the mounds of earth which are graves, appeared to thee only as the mountain tops of another far and new world; and how, in the midst of the fullness of life, thou didst acknowledge the value of death. The snow of the grave shall warm the frost-bitten limbs of age to

life again. As a navigator, who suddenly disembarks from the cold, wintry, and lonely sea, upon a coast which is laden with the warm rich blossoms of spring, so with one leap from our little bark we pass at once from winter to an eternal spring-time.

“ Rejoice in this dark hour that thy life dwells in the midst of a wider and larger life. The earth clod of the globe has been divinely breathed upon. A world swarms with life, for the leaf of every tree is a land of souls ; and every little life would freeze and perish if it was not warmed and borne up by the eddies of life about it. The sea of time glitters, like the sea of space, with countless beings of light ; death and resurrection are the valleys and mountains of

the ever swelling ocean. There exists no dead anatomy ; what seems to be such, is only another body. Without a universal living existence, there would be nothing but a wide all-encompassing death. We cling, like mosses, to the Alps of nature, drawing life from the high clouds. Man is the butterfly which flutters up to Chimborazo, but above the butterfly soars the condor : however many, small or great, the giant and the child are free wanderers in one garden ; and the fly of a day may retrace its infinite series of progenitors to those first beings of its kind which played over the waters of Paradise before the evening sun.

“ Never forget the thought, which is now

so clear to thee, that the individuality of man lasts out the greatest suffering and the most entrancing joy alike unscathed, while the body crumbles away in the pains and pleasures of the flesh. Herein are souls like marsh lights, which shine in the storm and the rain unextinguishable.

“Canst thou forget, in the dark hour, that there have been mighty men amongst us, and that thou art following after them? Raise thyself, like the spirits which stood upon their mountains, having the storm of life only about, and never above them. Call back to thee the kingly race of sages and poets who have inspired and enlightened nation after nation.”

“Speak of our Redeemer,” said the father.

4 **

“Remember Jesus Christ, in the dark hour; remember him who also passed through life; remember that soft moon of the infinite sun, given to enlighten the night of the world. Let life be hallowed to thee, and death also, for he shared both of them with thee. May his calm and lofty form look down on thee in the last darkness, and show thee his Father.”

A low roll of thunder was now heard to pass over the dun clouds which the tempest had left, and the setting sun filled the entire vault of heaven with the magnificence of his fire.

“Remember, in the last hour, how the heart of man can love. Canst thou forget the love wherewith one heart repays a

thousand hearts, and the soul during life is nourished and vivified from another soul, as the oak of a hundred years clings fast to the same spot, with its roots, and derives new strength, and sends forth new buds during its hundred springs ? ”

“ Dost thou mean me ? ” said the father.

“ I mean my mother also,” replied the son.

Justa wept, when she heard how her lover would console himself in his last hours with the reminiscence of the days of her love ; and the father said, but very gently, thinking on his wife, “ To meet again, to meet again ! ”

“ Remember, then, in the last hour,” continued Gottreich, “ that pure being with

whom thy life was beautiful and great, with whom thou hast wept tears of joy, with whom thou hast prayed to God, and in whom God appeared unto thee, in whom thou didst find the first and the last heart of love—and then close thine eyes in peace !”

On a sudden, the clouds were cleft into two huge black mountains, and the deep sun looked forth from between them, as it were, out of a valley between buttresses of rock, gazing upon the earth with its joy-glistening eye.

“ See,” said the dying man, “ what a glare ! ”

“ It is the evening sun, father.”

“ Ay, this day shall we see one another again ! ” continued the old man ; but he spoke of his wife who was long since dead.

The son was unable, from his emotion, to paint to his father the blessedness of meeting again upon the earth, which he had that very day enjoyed by anticipation, and described upon his journey ; or to say to him how it comes, that a meeting again is a renewal of love in a better state ; and that, if the first meeting was apt to overflow into the future, reminiscence binds the flowers of the present and the fruits of the past upon one stem.

Who could have courage to speak of the joys of earthly meeting to one who seemed already in the contemplation of a meeting in heaven ?

Startled, he asked, " Father, what ails thee ? "

" I *do* think thereon in the dark hour ;

ay, thereon and thereupon again; and death is also beautiful, and the parting in Christ," murmured the old man to himself, as he tried to take Gottreich's hand, which he had not strength to press. It was but the usual nervous snatching of the fingers of the dying. He continued to think that his son was still speaking to him, and said more and more distinctly and emphatically, "O thou blessed God!" until all the other luminaries of life were extinguished, and in his soul there stood nothing but the one sun—God!

At length he raised himself, and stretching out his arm, forcibly exclaimed, "There are three fair rainbows over the evening sun; I must go after the sun and

pass through with him !” He then fell back and all was over.

At that moment the sun went down, and there glimmered at his setting a broad rainbow in the east.

“ He is gone,” said Gottreich to Justa, in a voice choked with grief; “ but he has gone from us unto his God, in the midst of great, pious, and unmingled joy; then weep no more, Justa.” At that moment his own hitherto restrained tears found vent, and he pressed the dead hand against his face.

It grew dark, and a warm rain distilled gently over the earth. The children left the motionless form alone, and wept more tranquilly for that sun of their love, which,

with its pure light, had withdrawn from the clouds and tempests of the world to another dawn.



J. G. Torrey, printer.



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